

13 February - 14 March 1974

(Conference on Nonviolent Strategies for the Liberation of Latin America, held in Colombia; Seminar on Nonviolence, held at the Caracas University, Venezuela; visits to Panama, Costa Rica and Guatemala).

CONFERENCE ON NONVIOLENT STRATEGIES FOR THE LIBERATION OF LATIN AMERICA

Seminario Mayor, Medellin, Colombia (27 February - 28 February, 1974)

Number of participants: 66

from: Argentina; Bolivia; Brazil; Chile; Colombia; Costa Rica; Ecuador; Mexico; Panama; Paraguay; Peru, Republica Dominicana; El Salvador; Uruguay; France; Belgium; Austria; Federal Germany; Switzerland, India/England.

After the formalities of the opening, the Conference began with reading a letter from Earl Smith, who could not come to Medellin on account of illness. In this letter he outlined the background of the Conference and its objectives. The Conference, he hoped, would not end up only passing resolutions but would explore and adopt nonviolent strategies for the liberation of Latin America and ways to coordinate the various nonviolent struggles being carried on by nonviolent groups in different countries of the Continent. "We are here to work for what we affirm, and not to talk about what we do not affirm, i.e. violent methods".

At the first Conference on Coordination and Planning Nonviolent Action in Latin America, which was held in Alajuela, Costa Rica (28 May - 2 June, 1971), there was enough discussion on the question whether nonviolence is effective or not; therefore Earl Smith's point that at the Medellin we should concentrate on working out strategies for nonviolent action and not spend time on this never-ending debate. The Conference accepted Earl Smith's plea overwhelmingly; I found it a creative decision on the part of the participants.

Cesar Chavez and Helder Camara, who were expected to present main speeches, could not come - Cesar Chavez, because of the very critical state the Farm Workers' struggle was in at the time and Helder Camara, as he had travelled abroad so much that he felt that it would be unwise to leave the country again so soon. Understandably, he does not want to give any chance to the Brazilian government to say that he is not interested in his own constituency. Their absence at the Conference was a great disappointment; on the other hand, however, it gave the Conference a character so much needed today - somebody commented: it is not a conference of celebrities.

Out of the 66 participants 13 were from outside Latin America. Although fully-fledged delegates, they were at the Conference in the spirit of observers. These 13 included Hildagard and Jean Goss-Myar, who were greatly responsible for the Conference. But on account of their 10-years work for nonviolence in Latin America, they have become an integral part of the Latin American nonviolent movement. Contributions of outsiders were appreciated and warmly received, though it was often said that the situation in Latin America was totally different, and examples of nonviolent actions in other countries were not applicable in the Latin American situation.

The work of the Conference was done in both plenary sessions and groups. In the 6 plenary sessions presentations of a general nature and some case studies were made. The 4 groups worked on:

1. The struggle of the peasants - aims and methods of action - local, national and international.

2. The struggle of industrial workers - aims and methods of action - local, national and international.
3. The Church as an instrument of liberation - aims and methods - local, national and international; and
4. Conscientisation, mass training and preparation of a Latin American manual of nonviolent action.

Plenary Sessions - Presentations

- a. Christian nonviolence - force of liberation, Lecture by Jean Goss. Jean explained how he feels that the life of Christ and his teachings generate the power of liberating oneself from injustice in a perfect nonviolent way.
- b. Cesar Chavez's work with the Farm Workers Union. Ed Cuinan, who had talked to Cesar before coming to the Conference, gave a chronology of the development of the Farm Worker's struggle. Cesar Chavez with other farm workers set up an outfit to give service to farm workers, e.g. health, literacy, etc. It is from this small beginning that the Union came into being as a uniting force among the Chicano community in the U.S. The Union has also a considerable number of black Americans among its membership. At present, however, despite several significant victories the Union was under very severe repressive actions - arrests, violent attacks. At this moment they need moral support from all those who are working for justice.
- c. Community development in Torreon, North Mexico. Jose Balarse described the work of his Church. The main emphasis of their work was to conscientise the people and organise them for cooperative actions.
- d. From Colonialism to Independence - nonviolent action for freedom by the Congolese under the leadership of Patrice Lumumba. Lecture by Jean van Lierde. The movement was formed in 1958. In 1956 it had been thought that it might take 30 years to attain independence. In 1958 they talked of 10 years. It was amazing how a nonviolent revolutionary movement of the people of Congo defeated the powerful Colonial rulers and achieved independence in less than three years time. Speaking of this magnificent example, Jean, who had worked closely with Patrice Lumumba, said that if after working on nonviolent lines our colleagues turn to violence there must be a complete absence of revolutionary perspective in us. He also stressed that nonviolence to be effective must be organised on political and mass scale; building small and moralistic groups at grass root level will not bring about the changes necessary today.
- e. Sociological Analysis of the Latin American situation. Presented by Alfonso Gregory. In my opinion this presentation was the most valuable for an understanding of the problems a nonviolent revolutionary movement has to face in Latin America.

A few important points from the speech: Although there is a large degree of similarity in different countries of Latin America, there were many differences which necessitate different solutions in different situations. The following points characterise Latin America: The situation there should be seen in the context of the third world, where there is a great desire for the betterment of life - educationally, economically and politically. This desire is often not clearly formulated and defined. We have to create a process by which this desire can have a clear expression. The results of technical development have been very little. Moreover the products of technology have been unequally distributed. By historical process this has become institutionalised and is called normal.

The cultural aspect of the above point is connected with the process of industrialisation and urbanisation. While in Europe and North America the fruition of industrialisation was gradual and integrated into the normal life of the people, in Latin America it was sudden and without integration. Unlike Europe, in Latin America urbanisation preceded industrialisation. People come to the cities to try their luck as there is nothing in the rural areas to give them hope for the future. In rural areas there are two kinds of people - the patriarch, the land owner, and the masses.

Latin America has a serious problem of population explosion.

Stages of political evolution in Latin America: First there was the stage of oligarchy. The oligarchy dedicated themselves to the exploitation of natural resources and transport them to their mother countries. They identified themselves with Spain, Britain etc. and not with the globality of Latin America. This started changing at the beginning of this century, but there is still a big left-over of the oligarchy. Now Latin America is in the stage when there is a small urban bourgeoisie and the military on the one hand and on the other the workers and the campesinos, who do not take part in the process of decision making. They only count the days to the next election and hope for an improvement then. After the 50's Mexico, Peru and Brazil opened the way to capital from outside, i.e. through multinational corporations. By this process international forces, which conflicted with the interests of the people, were introduced in Latin American countries. The international bourgeoisie joined with the multinational corporations and the national bourgeoisie formulated their needs under the title "joint ventures". The international bourgeoisie could not identify their interests with any other group in these countries except the national bourgeoisie. The new alliance ignored the needs of the people. The reality is that politics are expressed within the State. Groups which can effectively express their interests form the policies. The other reality is that the State is becoming more and more centralised - which means political and social domination by those who make policies. As the people of Latin America have not been able to express their interests, and as the ruling classes have delegated power to the international interests, the people of Latin America are under the control of the joint forces of international corporations, national bourgeoisie and the military - in fact eventually under the international corporations which invest large sums of capital here. In the colonial period "we depended upon small groups within our own countries, now we have become dependent upon small groups from outside."

In Latin America the only movements which can have hope to get out of this state are those which include the people.

f. A couple of plenary sessions were used for establishing the machinery for the coordination of nonviolent work in Latin America. A committee of 5 people was formed and a coordinator (Adolfo Perez Esquivel, presently editing PAZ Y JUSTICIA) was elected. Adolfo's address: Espana 890 San Isidro, Prv. B.A., Argentina.

GROUPS: I took part in the 4th group: Conscientisation and Training.

The organising Committee had outlined the way groups should try to report on their experiences when doing case studies. The following headings were suggested under which the whole case study could be divided:

a. situation (facts); b. causes (why); c. intervention (what); d. objectives (for what); e. methodology (steps, how); f. subject (with whom); g. allies (who); h. consequences (success). People who presented case studies tried to help people identify their own problems. Gustavi said that they do not impose plans on the people. The people themselves should find out what is good for them; once they have understood the problem they organise their own actions. They can (Bishop's colleagues) then organise supporting action.

b. Culebra, Puerto Rico, project of A Quaker Action Group, Charlie Walker was one of the main organisers of this action. The situation was the presence of US Forces for target practice against the wishes of the people of Culebra. The action was nonviolent on the part of the people with the know-how of nonviolent direct action and full participation by the AQAG team. The action resulted in success; the US Forces were withdrawn from Culebra.

c. Gramdan movement, India. I described the background on which the movement was built and how the organisational skill of the Gandhian workers helped Vinoba Bhavé's concept of a land revolution succeed in obtaining such a large amount of land as voluntary donation and agreement on the part of the people of thousands of villages to relinquish their right of ownership of land and vest it with the whole village community. Although the movement created a climate for a real land revolution, until now it has not succeeded in making a political impact. One of the reasons for the nonsuccess is that the movement did not build the power of resistance against the land owning classes and the establishment. Unless nonviolence becomes a real threat to status quo it will not have the potential for revolutionary social change. Proposals for action: The group made two specific proposals.

1. Doing research about the land and other properties owned by churches and making an inventory of the property which can be given away. Building cooperative collective structures through the churches which their land and other properties and using the profit made by these enterprises for developing this work for the good of the people. Organising actions that will show the ridiculousness of big and pompous church ceremonies, including those which involve armed forces.

2. As the multinational corporations have total control over the economic and political lives of the peoples of Latin America and because the real centres of power of these corporations are in North America and Europe, the Latin American groups could organise public campaigns of appeal to the peoples of those continents, through their peace movements, to take whatever nonviolent action possible to force the corporations to not to interfere in the affairs of Latin American countries. A large letter writing campaign will bring about conscientisation in both Latin America and US and Europe and at the same time create a sense of solidarity among the people of these continents.

Our group had also the opportunity of listening to the Bishop of Mendoza, Argentina, who is involved with the work for refugees from Chile. Although it was not directly connected with the subject of discussion before the group, his account of what happened in Chile and how painful was the situation regarding refugees, helped us understand the problems of Latin America more fully.

A few points from the reports of other groups received by the plenary sessions:

The principal objective is human promotion and liberation.

The process of conscientisation is of utmost importance, because it opens the eyes and makes people act and discover together the possibilities of change.

Conscientisation is to be realised on the following levels - school/college; church; and town community.

Our task is not to provide answers but to encourage the habit of questioning. Forming a critical sense among people is essential, and so is the advancing knowledge of fundamental values according to the gospel. The church should maintain itself faithful to its main objective, i.e. liberation; to be a factor of unity for truth and justice in the community; to clarify the concept of nonviolent action for liberation is such a way that pacifism is not confused with cowardice. It should support all actions for man's liberation.

At Latin American level the church should fight for the respect of human rights in all countries; combat military repression and promote formation of nonviolent centres for liberation and social justice. It should denounce the injustices of the system and work jointly with other forces in the search for a society more brotherly and humane. In connection with industrial workers' struggle the idea "take the power at the base" should better be "assume collective right from the base" or "assume citizen rights". This would mean greater participation at the grass root level.

Direct action will be a consequence of the conscientisation process.

"Organising action" and "creating organisms or associations" are two different things. The latter may not be an immediate possible objective in some of the Latin American countries, e.g. Brazil or Chile.

There was an abundance of resources but very unequal distribution. It is important that farmers should be liberated so that they can fully participate in the national life on all levels.

The enemy should be clearly identified, so that our struggle can be correctly directed.

Farmers, or for that matter everybody, are their own agents for social change. They have to become aware of the reality in which they live and suffer.

Therefore the necessity of organising and coordinating.

Action should be related to concrete situations.

The movement needs efficient organisation, a journal, information centres and certain forms of educational and information set ups, i.e. a national secretary in each Latin American country, a continental coordinator etc.

The schedule of the conference was so tight that there was hardly any time for personal and informal meetings. One afternoon a three-hour excursion of the city of Medellin was arranged, a period utilised by many participants for personal matters, e.g. obtaining visas, flight arrangements etc. Jean Fabre and I arranged meetings with people from different countries during meal times.

As an outsider I found the conference most useful. I gained a fuller perspective of the work done by many people in Latin America. Some are doing grass root work without calling it "nonviolent". Some are working with a revolutionary outlook, but they do not want to describe it as such. Every body agreed with the analysis of the Latin American situation presented by Prof. Gregory, which to a great extent implies a healthy unity of approach to the solutions and the commitment to fight against social injustice by nonviolent methods.

We have to learn a lot from our Latin American brothers and sisters about the process of conscientisation on the grass root level. I am grateful for having had this opportunity of meeting so many active Latin American workers engaged in revolutionary social change.

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April 1, 1974.

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SEMINAR ON NONVIOLENCE held at the Central University, Caracas, Venezuela
19th and 20th February 1974

Background: It was at a meeting on the Campus held during my last visit in the Autumn of 1973 that a suggestion was made to organise a work-shop on nonviolence which I could lead during one of my visits to Venezuela. The occasion was created by the Medellin Conference. I decided to go to Medellin via Caracas, making a 3-day stop there for the workshop. I am thankful to Father Esteban Wood for his interest and wide contacts which made the workshop possible.

Participants: Twenty, most of them students either from the Central University or some high schools. One of the University Chaplains attended full time and the other two part time.

Apart from Esteban Wood and two other participants, only half of them had heard something about nonviolence and/or Mahatma Gandhi's or Martin Luther King's work. There were four or five who knew nothing about the subject. Hence it became more of a seminar than workshop.

Plans of discussions: Principles of nonviolence,
Application of nonviolent action in the past,
case studies, a) Gandhian struggle for independence of India, b) Farm Workers movement led by Cesar Chavez, and c) anti-war movement with special focus on conscientious objection to military service, and
Application in the Latin American situation,
a) Analysis of the situation and identification of problems, and b) formulating strategies and tactics.

Some points of discussion: Nonviolence is not passive acceptance of social injustice; it is not the weapon of the coward; it is not there to support status quo; it requires as much, if not more, imagination, alertness, training, discipline and the need for constant search for new tools and techniques to deal with ever changing situations, as does the military; while the present system ends up with total centralisation, nonviolence works for decentralisation; all centralist systems inevitably depend on military power, but a decentralist society develops the power of the people and has to be opposed to militarism which is inherently dehumanising; the present systems thrive on creating images of enemies outside their territorial boundaries, but a social order based on the principles of nonviolence does not need external treats to unify people; while the present systems solidify stratifications of society, nonviolence works for the destratification of society, in most of the present systems initiative and voluntary spirit are taken away for the individual, but nonviolence demands that voluntary spirit and individual initiative become the key of human relations and development; and regimentation of some kind or other is the characteristic of present society, nonviolence is against regimentation.

Evaluation: The last hour or so of the total 10 hours was spent in evaluation of the contents, style and usefulness of the seminar. Gist of some of the comments:

"Such an experience gives a spark, but what is the future of nonviolence?"

"Not sure if nonviolence can be useful in Venezuelan situation."

"I did not know anything about nv before; I wish there were more young people at the seminar."

"I came to the seminar because of my boy friend. I am glad I did. I now realise that aggression within oneself must be channelled to constructive action. I hope I shall be able to do this in my life".

"I came to learn about techniques, but did not get much from the seminar. We wasted half of the time today in identifying the problems; instead we should have discussed techniques more systematically."

"I am optimistic; it is a pity time was too short."

"I got two new points: problem of militarism and multinational corporations."

A proposal was made to hold a longer and residential seminar some time in future with better preparations.

COLOMBIA: 22nd February - 3 March

Background - The majority of the 22.5 million population of Colombia is Mestizo. About 20% of it are of unmixed European stock and 15 to 20% African or Mulattos. Approximately 300,000 Native Americans have survived. Colombia moved into large scale violence after 1941. This was caused by conflicts between parties and social unrest, which continued until late 1957. In 1944 the jurisdiction of military courts was extended over certain areas of civilian violent actions. From 1945 until the middle of 1958 the country was in the state of siege, which was ended by Alberto Lleras Camargo, Liberal leader when he took office as President on August 7, 1958. The military came into power owing to the irresponsible behaviour of the two major parties - Liberal and Conservative, but by the end of 1957 they had reconciled their differences and on December 1, 1957 a plebiscite was held to make a national coalition - National Front - as part of the Constitution to remain effective for 16 years. The coalition was based on a 50 - 50 division of government offices and rotation of the presidency.

This coalition has now ended (1973) and the country is presently in a pre-election period. Gomez, the Conservative candidate has turned more to the right than he was - presumably to win support of other right wing people, and of course of the traditionalists of his own party. He is considered a realist by the middle and upper classes. Lopez, the Liberal candidate is a populist and probably has a majority behind him. Spinoza, of the National Popular Alliance and Mehia, representing the left opposition groups, do not seem to have much chance.

During the National Front period an Accion Communal movement was organised at government level to deal with the problems of public service and "human promotion". In some regions similar communitarian groups were organised on voluntary basis. They formed a federation. Government and politicians did not like this development and stopped it. The present government seems to have reconsidered the matter and is allowing the promotion of such popular organisation. The Central Trade Union (U.T.C.) is independent of government and political parties. In recent years the Church has made some efforts in rural organisation. The Accion Cultural Popular has two or three centres for leadership training: the National Agrarian Federation (FANAL) is forming co-operative societies. The last conference of the Bishops of Colombia (November 1973) discussed the question of social justice. Preparations for the conference took a year collecting information and making analyses of the situation in the country.

The economic situation of the country is becoming difficult for the low income people who constitute the overwhelming majority of the population. Inflation, increasing cost of living and unemployment are the greatest problems. Although there is a rapid growth of high level technology and increasing number of industrial enterprises the poor do not benefit from it. In some rural regions of the country vast areas of land are owned by very rich people; in other regions the problem is of "minifundias" - mini-farms, which are uneconomic to work on, thus causing exodus to the cities.

Nonviolence in Colombia

In 1962 Jean Goss made several contacts. (One of these was with Camilo Torres, who was very interested in nonviolence, but did not have any other contact to further his interest and knowledge and as he was very keen to develop his revolutionary movement as a matter of urgency he took to traditional methods of struggle). Jean Goss later made further visits and held more discussions; people also received literature on nonviolence from other countries. Some nonviolent direct action projects were organised. A conference was held in 1968, and three pamphlets with articles on nonviolence were published. Later a few more local and national conferences were held with priests and students.

I noticed that people - even at the Conference (Medellin) - had very little information about Mahatma Gandhi's work, which I think can be of much relevance to the situation in Latin America.

Military Service in Colombia is compulsory. It falls to the fate of the poor to fulfill their "patriotic obligation"; the rich often manage to get out of it on the strength of money, whether legally or illegally. The military now wants to take mostly city people and leave out the men in rural areas.

Some of the Church leadership has mildly raised the question of conscientious objection to military service. There is a mention of this idea in at least two documents: Document de Medellin and Colombia entelcambio.

The Native Colombians

I have noticed with much distress that there was a complete silence in regard to the conditions and treatment of the original inhabitants of the country who are the descendants of the great Tarron, Quimbay, Sinu and several other tribal groups. As I had said in my last report on Latin America, the whole continent generally has a very inhuman attitude towards the American Indians, as these groups are known by the rest of the world.

Art in Colombia

I had known of Mayan sculpture since my student days. Last year the visit to Mexico had given me a deeper insight into the greatness of the art of the pre-Colombian Central and South Americas. Art of several other cultures does come at par with it but none surpasses it. In Bogota the little spare time I had I spent in three museums. The most fabulous Gold Museum, with its 18,000 pre-Colombian gold articles, many of them rare; the Archaeological Museum, with some fine examples of pre-Colombian pottery and sculpture; and the National Museum which houses both pre-Colombian and Colonial examples. The pre-Colombian section has some very good examples of human creativity, the Colonial section is full of rubbish and so called glamour of plunder and violence, with some exceptions.

Only after seeing the Gold Museum I realised what wealth - in terms of art - the colonists ruined by melting all the gold they plundered from the simple natives (Tairona, Simu, Quimbaya, Muisca, Calima, Tolima and Cauca tribes) to transport it to their mother countries. It was probably towards the beginning of this century when they saw that what they were turning into gold bricks were some of the finest examples of art, they started collecting them as museum objects. They must have melted literally several millions of such pieces.

PANAMA, COSTA RICA AND GUATEMALA - 4th to 13th March

In Panama I experienced total failure in making contacts.

Guatemala: there is not much to report except that I was able to make a few good contacts. The country was passing through an election crisis, which made it even more difficult to arrange meetings. What I was able to do was to make preparations for some future possibilities.

Costa Rica: There is a general feeling of helplessness everywhere, something not unique to Costa Rica. So it is hard to get many people to talk about things which they feel are beyond their capacity of change. Nonetheless a group of seven students - all with different experiences - came to a meeting. We were all together 11 people. After listening to each others' backgrounds and experiences we discussed the question of effective strategies for social change. It was not necessary to discuss whether social change was indeed needed. Nearly every one at the meeting was concerned with it already.

The same evening I met a senior faculty member of the department of social sciences of the University of Costa Rica. I was not surprised to learn that

the atmosphere of the university was still that of a high school, i.e. students were lectured; the content of these lectures had to be learnt by heart. There is no questioning. "And if there is no questioning and thinking it is not education" said this professor, who with several of her colleagues has planned a new scheme under which students will be able to think and analyse situations. For instance the first item on the new plan was: what should be the role of the university today? The scheme has potential. So much goes on under the noses of educated people, yet they do not ask the why or how of it. If all the students of social sciences in Latin America start asking questions about their countries' relationship with other countries (e.g. USA) and centralised agencies (e.g. multinational corporations), they will find some revealing answers, particularly when they will find out the effects of foreign investments on their social and economic lives. They will then be full of indignation. What that indignation finds a creative and nonviolent outburst, that will be the beginning of a new era.

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